

Book Reviews

Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias, editors. *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*. New York UP, 2016. Pp. ix, 372. CAD \$38.80.

The contributors to *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*, edited by Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias, theorize time through pairs of linked keywords. Each chapter scrutinizes a binary opposition around which modernity has organized time: the past versus the future, clock versus lived time, embodied versus dis-embodied time, or the serial versus the simultaneous. There are twenty such pairings in all, each examined by a well-known scholar. The volume is not a guide to existing debates, nor a glossary of key terms, but rather an astonishing collaborative theoretical project—a compendium of highly original essays derived from the dialectical pressure exerted by the binary terms. The essays are organized into three sections: time as history (which largely challenges the theoretical premises of history as it is currently studied in academe), time as measurement (which does theorize clocks but also considers how time structures meaningful professional and domestic labour), and time as culture (including media, computing, recorded music, mathematics, and sampling). They draw on a wide range of theoretical texts and enter into frequent conversation with thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Reinhart Koselleck, Paul Ricoeur, Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Johannes Fabian, Harold Bloom, and, indeed, Pythagoras. The essays share a commitment to finding, in contemporary life, multiple and overlapping temporalities at work that can be considered ideological formations. To this end, Burges and Elias urge us to approach “the contemporary” etymologically, as a set of “times joined together” (4), and thus toward a “multiplicity” of times always concurrently operational even if not sufficiently aligned to be described as “concurrent” (12). This sophisticated volume will be of interest to scholars across many disciplines, but will be especially important for those working in history, literature, anthropology, American studies, and cultural studies; it would be an ideal text for a graduate course in time studies within any of these disciplines.

The contributors are true leaders in their fields, which span film studies, cultural studies, creative writing, ecocriticism, literary modernism, and video art. Some, such as Paul D. Miller (also known as DJ Spooky, That Subliminal Kid), Sandra Stephens, Ursula Heise, and James Phelan, are such towering figures that they can be considered scholarly celebrities. Without exception the work is richly theorized and adventurous, particularly Rachel

Haidu's discussion of influence as a form of transmission and Miller's paean to Pythagoras' mysteriousness and ubiquity. The essays draw examples from film, visual art, and music, as well as cultural phenomena like corporate slogans, the avian flu pandemic, the shortening of the second in 1972, and 1970s approaches to child rearing. While a few of the essays reach back to the beginnings of capitalism or the long reception history of mathematics to make their cases, most focus on the twentieth century, examining modern and contemporary culture especially.

The contributors analyze these cultural texts through and against the binary pairings that have inspired each essay. Some of the pairings are foundational (e.g., Elias on past/future and Audrey Anable on labor/leisure), while others are more unexpected—for instance, Mark McGurl focuses on how time is gendered through the binary real time/quality time, and Anthony Reed argues that the binary authentic/artificial is, at root, a temporal division. The pairings compel the contributors into dialectical readings that frequently produce conceptual breakthroughs. Burges' essay, for instance, offers an Adorno-inspired reading of the 2012 Disney film *Wreck-It Ralph* and suggests that innovation and obsolescence are concepts in perpetual conflict rather than co-constitutive markers of innovation and progress (82). Elias, meanwhile, tests the past/future binary and discovers that duration (rather than synchronicity) is the opposite of the diachronic (35). Elizabeth Freeman's essay on the synchronic/anachronic binary—one of the collection's finest—urges us to think about the relationship between those terms, understand why they were never truly opposite, and consider how that non-opposition can help us “conceptualize freedom” (129). Thus the volume leverages its pairings to generate meaningful new thought.

There are many other highlights that deserve mention. Reed, in perhaps the volume's most impressive essay, discusses how the “racialized spatiotemporal schema” conflates space and time through “the ideology of cultural distinctness” (294). He shows how the naming of certain cultural productions as “authentic” enforces bourgeois white privilege, and how recording technologies have been complicit in that ideological task. Yet Reed, via the concept of “semblance” and an extended reading of the song “Um Ricka” (2009) by K'naan and Wale, argues that the mixtape (as genre) can nevertheless activate a “nonclosure of culture” (302). Some essays are admirably clear, as when Phelan, in a decisive textbook-like essay on the narrative techniques of panalepsis and prolepsis, gives examples from contemporary fiction to illustrate how these categories of narrative temporality borrow from Gérard Genette's work. Phelan suggests that narrative fiction changed in the wake of postmodernism in the 1960s, eliminating any one narrative strand's claim

to primacy (249). Other essays are disorienting and challenging, as with Michelle Stephens and Sandra Stephens' consideration of "embodied/disembodied." Drawing on Deleuze and Massumi, they analyze the latter Stephens' video installations as a way of testing the ideological limits of scopogenic regimes. While I am skeptical of their claim that the disembodied body "evades ideology" when it is captured on film (257), they persuasively show us how to think about embodiment and disembodiment in a temporal, rather than spatial, way. Other acmes of the volume include Jesse Matz's overview of time in Ricoeur, Paul de Man, and Deleuze (226); David James' complex and subtle take on modernism, modernity, and postmodernism; Mark Currie's analysis of the Derridean trace in a discussion of two HSBC slogans; Heather Houser's advisory about the temporal demands of climate change and the ideological impact of carbon calculators; and Jared Gardner's encomium to Einstein's thought, as explained through comics and cinema. All of these are outstanding essays.

I do harbor a few small concerns, as is inevitable in a book this richly stocked with new ideas. The foremost of these concerns is about the insistent modernism of it all. The volume proposes it will "unlock the historicity of time" and promises to show how its paired keywords "grow from historical transformations" (1–2), and yet, by and large, when the essays seek out historical examples, they are drawn only from the early twentieth century: the Titanic, literary modernism, Einstein, or the passenger pigeon. This, despite Koselleck's and others' suggestions that time became modern in the eighteenth century. The emphatic presentism of the collection is especially unfortunate given the editors' preemptive statement that they "are not interested in engaging debates about how to define 'the present' or 'the contemporary' as a period marker" (2). Such a limited historical range risks distorting the findings in these essays and will unnecessarily, but sharply, delimit the usefulness of this book for researchers in other fields. A second problem crops up when an essay latches too hard onto its examples, until it becomes more an essay on that one example than on the paired keywords more broadly. For instance, Anable's essay on labour and leisure gets caught up in a long disquisition on mobile phones and "mobile time," as characterized by the intensifying demand for productivity, metatasking, and the mobile phone as a timekeeping device. The essay, I think, would be more effective if reframed as an essay on "mobile time"—a much smaller topic—than the vast subject of labour and leisure. Despite their variety of topics and approaches, the essays also risk repetitiveness, as we see in Part II, in which each essay seems to find that the given terms might appear to be opposites, but actually there is no way to draw a division between them—an argument made by Anable, Gardner,

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McGurl, Elias, and others. Finally, I have some quibbles with specific claims from individual essays: is Christianity really best understood as “a technology,” as Stanley Hauerwas would have it (281), as opposed to, say, an ideology, myth structure, philosophical system, or cultural institution? But such quibbles will invariably arise when reading a generative and ambitious book that challenges us to think in broad conceptual terms about modernity.

All in all, *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present* is an outstanding and cohesive collection filled with insights and provocations. It will merit frequent re-readings from a number of perspectives as time studies continues to evolve as a multi-disciplinary field. Burges and Elias worry that “the terms ‘past,’ ‘present,’ and ‘future’ seem too static, too thin to express our full experience of temporality. They capture neither our sense of the ephemerality of the instant nor our anxieties about the long unfurlings of time that exceed human lifespans and comprehension” (1). Their volume represents an important step toward developing new and more critical ways of thinking about time.

David Sigler